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ABSTRACT

Traditional literary canons, represented by E. D. Hirsch's list in "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know" of works which every literate American "needs to know," deemphasize the cultural significance of women and minorities. An alternative and expanded model of cultural literacy, GODDESS (Gender or Diversity Designed to Show Significance), could be a new way to teach the dominant white male culture about women, minorities, the old and the poor. Cultural literacy should be expressed in non-sexist language and should respect women's different value system and mode of relating to others. Teachers must be sensitive to the ways in which women's approach to both writing and reading differs from that of men. Published criticism prior to the 1970s reveals established parameters for appropriate readings of literature which require the adoption of male values. It is imperative that the literary canon be expanded to include high quality literature by women and minorities, including works in various nonfiction genres. "What Every American Needs to Know" should refer not to Hirsch's white male canon but to an expanded list arrived at through a commitment to engendering cultural literacy. (MHC)

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Engendering Cultural Literacy

by Lynn Z. Bloom

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> Literature is political. . . . One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader . . . is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away . . . .
>
> American literature is male. To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male. . . . Power is the issue in the politics of literature (xi, xiii).
>
> Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*, 1977

E.D. Hirsch's definition of "cultural literacy" is clear and unequivocal. His attempt to codify "the best that has been known and thought in the world," that is, the Western World of the past 5000 years, consists of a List of *What Every American*

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Needs to Know, as he has subtitled *Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch, an English professor, and two other white male professors, a historian and a physicist, at the University of Virginia compiled this list of some 5000 items "intended to illustrate the the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans . . . share" (146). Despite the book's exhortative subtitle, the List, he claims, is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive* (xiv). In *Cultural Literacy* Hirsch argues that the *Rhetoric* of Hugh Blair, an 18th century Scottish rhetorician, not only codified standard English by "fixing a standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation," but provided "a dictionary of cultural literacy for those who had not been born to English literate culture, for use by provincials like the Scots and colonials like the Americans" (84-85). Noah Webster's *Dictionary* (1828), by codifying standard American English, did the same for American culture.

Hirsch hopes, through *Cultural Literacy*, to become Webster's successor. He contends that this List, on whose contents Hirsch and 100 other consultants, unspecified by name, gender, or occupation, agreed, contains the code of the dominant culture. This is a culture in which references to men or male-oriented aspects outnumber comparable references to

women anywhere between 12:1 (titles of literary works beginning with C--only *The Children's Hour*, in comparison with *Candide*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Catch 22*) and 3:1 (literary characters whose names begin with S--Sherlock Holmes, Shylock, and Simon Legree are pitted against poor Snow White). The average is 76% references to men (almost all white) (unless they're objects, such as Big Ben, or concepts, as in "Boys will be boys") to 24% (mostly white) women, such as Lucretia Borgia and the Birth of Venus. It is true that there is no female equivalent -yet- to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. It is also true, however, that the List contains Saint Francis but not Saint Teresa, Andrew Wyeth but not Georgia O'Keeffe, Ralph Ellison but not Alice Walker. This implies (as does the classical, non-agrarian orientation) a great deal about the values and perspective of the List-makers, though Hirsch never specifies their criteria for inclusion. Collectively they encourage the very male bias, anti-female orientation that Fetterly examines throughout *The Resisting Reader*:

> . . . To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness--not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness . . . [that is] the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male--to be universal, to be American--is to be *not female*. Not

> only does powerlessness characterize woman's experience of reading, it also describes the content of what is read (xiii).

Hirsch claims, in half a sentence, to be aware of "ideological objections to codifying and imposing the culture of the power structure" (142) and of the dangers of reducing all of knowledge to a list of finite length that can be memorized (143). However, he believes that the great social gain, "the demystification of literate culture" through the mastery of "only a few hundred pages of information [that] stand between the literate and the illiterate," will make the difference between "dependence and autonomy" that now exists (143). His argument in favor of unified (i.e. white male Western) culture, "monoliteracy" (92) is analogous to his argument for monolingualism. Multilingualism "enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness. . . . Encouragement of multilingualism is contrary to our traditions and extremely unrealistic" (92-93). A unified cultural literacy could provide, he asserts without proof, "the achievement of significantly greater social and economic equity" (143).

Perhaps it could. Perhaps not. One can see the multimillion dollar CAT (Cultural Achievement Testing) machinery getting into high gear, Hirsch, self-appointed, in the driver's seat, steamrolling along, maintaining the status quo of white male cultural literacy. However well-intentioned his motives, and they are benevolent, the fact remains that this model of cultural literacy deemphasizes the cultural significance of women and minorities, a very large component of the American population past, and passing, and to come.

I would like to propose an alternative model of cultural literacy, GODDESS, Gender or Diversity Designed to Show Significance, as being an equivalent and perhaps equally effective way to empower women and minorities. Why not educate the dominant white middle and upperclass male culture to learn the culture of women, minorities, the old, and the poor? We have met that larger culture, and it is us. Since other speakers will be addressing race and class, I will focus here on gender. Because our time is limited, I will identify some attributes of an expanded model of cultural literacy in relation to gender and language and gender and reading (which has implications for writing, as well). I will not elaborate much on those with which I you're probably familiar.

Gender and Language

Cultural literacy should be expressed in non-sexist language. I do not mean simply the substitution of *Ms.* for *Miss* or *Mrs.*, or the substitution of plural or s/he or other gender balanced forms for the generic *he*. Though these are important, the use of nonsexist pronouns is widespread. Certainly in our profession today a textbook using sexist language would not find a receptive publisher--whether for ideological or economic reasons doesn't matter. However, school systems and universities would be well advised to adopt guidelines for non-sexist language, modeled perhaps after NCTE's guidelines. If they can just say no to sexual harrassment, they can enforce non-sexist guidelines, as well--in publications, among their faculty and staff, and among their students. They can also make sure that illustrative materials contain equivalent references to women and to men, in number and in kind.

Harder to ensure are the precepts engendered by Carol Gilligan's research and embodied in *In a Different Voice* (1982). Despite methodological problems which have questioned the reliability some of her research findings, her research

calls into question Lawrence Kohlberg's male-oriented hierarchy of moral development. Kohlberg's scale postulates:

> a three-level progression from an egocentric understanding of fairness based on individual need (stages one and two), to a conception of fairness anchored in the shared conventions of societal agreement (stages three and four), and finally to a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity (stages five and six) (Gilligan 27).

Thus "moral maturity" for Kohlberg is based on such factors as one's "ability to bring deductive logic to bear on the solution of moral dilemmas," the ability "to differentiate morality from law," and the ability to recognize that laws can have mistakes (Gilligan 27).

Gilligan's research, on the contrary, demonstrates, as does Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering*, that considering women's experiences changes the dimensions of how we interpret and evaluate behavior. The underlying epistemology "shifts from the Greek ideal of knowledge as correspondence between mind and form to the Biblical conception of knowing as a process of human relationship. . . . In the different voice of women," says Gilligan, "lies the truth and

ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection. The failure to see the different reality of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices," she continues, "stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation" (173).

Gilligan's findings imply that women's different value hierarchy and modes of conducting and interpreting social relationships will be manifested in their writings (student as well as published) and in their reactions to what they read. Consequently, in recognizing and validating two different modes, men's and women's, we as teachers should be more sensitive to the diverse values our students represent and the ways in which they express these. Thus when we give reading and writing assignments, lead class discussion, interpret reading material, and comment on student writing we should be aware that women may respond in a different voice from men, and we should listen to this voice with attention and respect.

As we have seen, Hirsch's classical concept of cultural literacy privileges (I don't like the word but can't ignore the concept) the canon, selected literature of elitist white men. However sympathetic these authors may have been to women, they largely wrote for, by, and about other elitist white men, who canonized the works and deified their authors. This canon formed the basis of graduate education, nationwide, in the humanities for most of the past century. In many graduate schools today it still does so (cf Franklin).

A case in point is the doctoral reading list--aha, another List--for preliminary examinations in English at the University of Michigan, circa 1958, eleven closely printed pages of canonical British and American literature from the beginning of the Elizabethan era to 1950. There are two hundred and forty five men on this List (including such worthies as George Crabbe, Thomas Love Peacock, and Coventry Patmore), representing many times that number of works: one line, for instance, reads "William Shakespeare, *Complete Works* (including poems)." There are ten women on the List--six British (Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Jane Austen. Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf) and three American (Anne Bradstreet, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and

Emily Dickinson), representing eight novels and miscellaneous poems. Not a single work by blacks or ethnic minorities, unless Joseph Conrad counts as Polish.

Even a quick look at published criticism before the early 1970s reveals that, despite disagreements, there were established parameters for appropriate readings of these texts that functioned like invisible electric fences, beyond which no reader could stray. To read such literature in the spirit in which it was written is, as Fetterley says, perforce to adopt male views and male values. Consequently, although it was acceptable (though shocking) to regard Satan as the hero (or certainly the most interesting character) in *Paradise Lost*, it was unacceptable to defend that quintessential temptress, Eve. Men and women readers alike were expected to share Lawrence's perspective in *Sons and Lovers*, to side with artist-in-the-making Paul Morel against his repressive, controlling, desperately loving mother and the two women who love him with equal passion and possessiveness. Likewise, readers of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* must sympathize with Frederic Henry, not Catherine, who dies in childbirth while trying to bear Henry's child. As Fetterley says,

> For Frederic to survive, free of the intolerable burdens of marriage, family, and fatherhood, yet with his vision of himself as the heroic victim of cosmic antagonism intact, Catherine must die. Frederic's necessities determine Catherine's fate. He is, indeed, the agent of her death. . . . (xvi)

> If we weep at the end of the book . . . it is not for Catherine but for Frederic Henry. All our tears are ultimately for men, because in the world of *A Farewell to Arms* male life is what counts. And the message to women reading this classic love story and experiencing its image of the female ideal is clear and simple: the only good woman is a dead one . . . . (71)

Yet according to Judith Gardiner, women read, as they write, in more intense and personal ways than men do. She quotes Margaret Drabble's reaction to Doris Lessing's works, "'most of us [women] read books with this question in our mind: what does this say about my life?'" (185). What is in Milton and Lawrence and Hemingway for women may be quite different, as Fetterley has shown for Hemingway, from what male writers and male critics find there. My own experience in teaching autobiography, however, convinces me that men and women alike read autobiographies as analogues to their own lives ("How does this person's life resemble mine?" "What can I learn from it?" "What's in it for me?"). They respond intimately, sympathetically to these narratives of the lives of real people ("I can relate to that.") even when they would react more

distantly to other works of fiction (except bildungsroman), including works by the same author. Women and men alike, white and Hispanic as well as black, identify with the real-life protagonist of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, an "angry, searing account of an actual life of deprivation and prejudice; but [they] treat with far greater detachment Wright's equally angry, searing account of Bigger Thomas's life of deprivation in the fictional *Native Son* because they do not believe it really happened" (Bloom 8).

What we know is what we teach. We must ensure that the literary canon is expanded--I would prefer exploded--to include works of high quality literature by women and minority writers, not just Michigan's Big Ten, but literature that extends from Sappho to Marianne Moore, Mary Wortley Montagu to Margaret Attwood to Nadine Gordimer. We must engender students' ways of reading these texts, as well as the reading Lists, to make them accessible to women and men, majorities and minorities--not necessarily alike, but equivalent. Men as well as women need to be able to read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* with understanding; men as well as women need to know why Tillie Olson's "I Stand Here Ironing" represents an appropriate subject and stance for a woman author and a woman character;

men as well as women need to recognize the significance and complexity of female friendships and mother-daughter relationships as portrayed not only by Jane Austen and George Eliot, but by Gertrude Stein, Gail Godwin, Maxine Kumin, and Toni Morrison.

One significant way to expand the canon is to include more non-traditional materials, what Annie Dillard calls "literary nonfiction." As Gardiner observes, "women's writing often does not conform to the generic prescriptions of the male canon" (185). There is, however, a wealth of distinguished writing by women and men alike, in various nonfiction genres: personal essays, autobiographies, diaries, collections of letters, oral histories, travel narratives, natural history. As interpreted by the following women writers (among others), these genres expand and validate a wide range of experiences beyond the shores of the traditional white male mainstream: Maya Angelou, Rachel Carson, Joan Didion, M.F.K. Fisher, Frances FitzGerald, Maxine Hong Kingston, Margaret Laurence, Mary McCarthy, Margaret Mead, Jan (also John) Morris, Anais Nin, May Sarton, Kate Simon, Susan Sontag, Alice Walker.

Conclusion

A multitude of brave new worlds awaits for us to explore. Through a commitment to en-gender cultural literacy, we can help ourselves and our students to reinterpret familiar literature, discover forgotten works, and write in genres new and old. That literature by women and men speaks to both women and men, though at times in different modes with different messages, is truly What Every American Needs to Know in order to be assured of cultural literacy.

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